

LIGHT-BEARER TO THE WORLD OF  
DARKNESS

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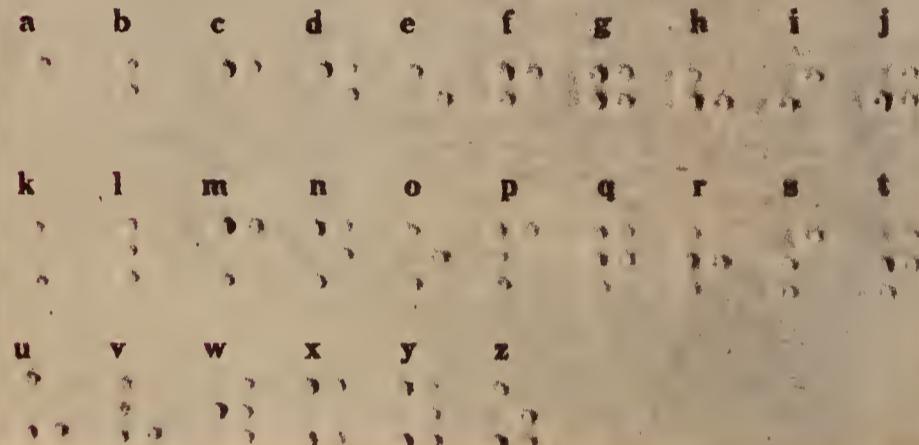
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The hands of a sightless man "see" a book made understandable by Braille.



The Braille alphabet conveys meanings by this simple code of embossed dots.



A bust of Louis Braille—"a brilliant, inventive intellect."

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## Light-Bearer to the World of Darkness

**A**HUNDRED years ago in Coupvray, a little French village about twenty-five miles from Paris, Louis Braille died—a complete human being, though blind, and great because he had greatly used his loss of sight to liberate his afflicted fellow creatures. He had both lived and died in the glorious light of a victorious spirit and a brilliant, inventive intellect. The purpose of this article is to lay my tribute on the shrine which he occupies forever in the hearts of captives of the dark for whom he held aloft "lamps with hope's young fire to fill."

Braille was, I believe, among the forerunners of unimagined changes in society and the views which cement it. For he wrought his will through an invention so to mold the world of the blind that today their spirit and mind are different. Their outlook upon life is different because a blind man dared to assert his manhood and to establish for them a practical system of writing and reading that they could use for educational purposes.

Louis was born in 1809 while the

**One hundred years ago Louis Braille died, but his alphabet remains precious to the blind.**

By HELEN KELLER

turmoil of revolution was sweeping over France. He was in the thick of events when Napoleon imposed levies of bread, cows, mares and hay upon the countryside for the Grand Army after its terrible defeat in Russia, and the people were assessed for money. Simon René, Louis' father, paid a tax of 340 francs. Later, the Russian grenadiers came through Coupvray, and Simon René was forced to give up his cow. Afterward, there was an invasion of Prussian soldiers, and he was compelled to provide billeting for them for seventy-four days. Louis could not help sensing the hardships of the people around him or hearing their often excited political discussions.

**A**T the age of 3 Louis accidentally pierced his eye with a sharp instrument in the shop of his father, who was a harnessmaker, and as a result he never beheld the light of day again. There is very little known regarding the effects of his blindness upon Louis

as a small child. But, judging from the brilliancy of his mind displayed later at school, I picture him as an exceptionally bright little boy, full of curiosity concerning everything he could touch. Besides, he was blessed with affectionate parents, and I am sure that he responded to their love as a plant to sunshine.

It is a fact that he attended the village school with seeing children, where he was recognized as a pupil of unusual promise, and it is easy to surmise how he sensed an atmosphere charged with social ferment and unpredictable events. No doubt he caught something of the white-hot energy that was stirring in the souls and minds of the French people. Possibly, it was owing to this circumstance that arrangements were made for his enrollment as a pupil at the Institution des Jeunes Aveugles de Paris.

Certainly, the driving force of a new France — and, as it proved, of world change — was aroused in Louis before

his thirteenth year when his father took him to the institution, and it was never extinguished throughout his life. Despite his horror of violence, he believed in the republic and its new implications, and after he was appointed as a professor at the institution, he actively applied the freedom proclaimed in the Rights of Man to his blind fellows who had not known before how to use the initiative and self-determination that are essential to individual development. His invention of a dot system as a tool for their education was a means by which their intellectual release was effected.

**I**HAVE read all the facts about Louis' outlook on the world I could secure, and I find no statement of his "philosophy of life." However, when he was a professor at the institution, he taught his pupils Braille as a means to their own intellectual development, nurtured their love and pursuit of knowledge and trained them to be skillful and efficient, either as workers or as musicians. He was a modern educator in the best sense—he recognized the right and the need of the blind to evolve personalities as natural and resourceful as those of the seeing. He seems never (Continued on Page 44)

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to have thought of himself as a creature set apart from seeing humanity.

The blind were then only just emerging from the degradation which had pursued them down the ages. Although the pupils at the Institution des Jeunes Aveugles de Paris received affectionate care and the best possible instruction, yet as a whole the blind were still avoided and regarded as victims of divine wrath.

**A**T the institution, various characters in relief had been attempted in the hope that the blind could use them for reading and writing. Valentin Haüy, the founder of the Institution des Jeunes Aveugles, had devised an embossed type resembling ordinary capitals. Unfortunately, however, his system did not meet adequately the physiological requirements of the reader's finger. As a result, the characters were considerably modified and other new types were brought forth on the principle that the blind and the seeing should employ the same sort of printed type as far as possible. Still, the number of readers remained discouragingly small, and obviously without books the sightless could not be educated.

Charles Barbier, an army official who had been much occupied with various modes of communication and of correspondence, invented a method in which words were represented by signs composed of dots arranged in different positions, punched on paper with a simple contrivance.

The base of the Barbier system was twelve dots and he thought that from it all sorts of combinations might be made for all purposes. But it presented grave drawbacks. It occupied much space and was too cumbersome for the nerve centers of the finger to seize. Besides, Barbier did not follow the rules of orthography, his code was phonetic, and therein lay an obstacle for the pupils and a threat to their chance of attaining high scholarship.

**I**T was Louis Braille who, with the neat French faculty of adaptation, reduced the base of twelve dots to six and demonstrated that six dots were sufficient for the alphabet and marks of punctuation, mathematics and music. Thus, his rapidly flowering genius from that amazing seed of ingenuity wrought the greatest achievement for the blind.

After his appointment as professor at the institution, he modified and perfected his system for the writing of music, and by that step he placed the musical blind on a footing of equality with the seeing. Under the benign directorship of M. Pignier, he taught the



Memorial ceremony in Coupvray, France, in front of monument which

students in Braille the subjects of grammar, geography, history, mathematics and music. His splendid powers of teaching delighted M. Pignier and inspired confidence. Finally, he brought out a written explanation of his ingenious procedure of point writing. The first edition was embossed in 1829 and displayed at the Exposition of Industrial Products in 1834. There was a second Braille edition of Louis' pamphlet in 1837.

**H**E was now sure of his triumph, but he remained humble and absorbed in his work. To escape interruptions he devoted himself to his experiments during the early morning hours and sometimes far into the night. The mental picture of him carrying paper, slate, stiletto and other tools of labor to his bedroom and falling asleep in their midst moves me inexpressibly. He was literally wearing himself out. He was a prey to pulmonary tuberculosis, and at times he had a presentiment of his early death. He never murmured, however. When a hemorrhage overtook him he went home with the warm-hearted wishes of the institution for a holiday of weeks or months or even years.

On his return to the institution, he took up his work again with brave cheer, braced his pupils "in the dark hours and crooked passages," and maintained a gentle, yet firm discipline among the children.

It seemed impossible that in the peace and benevolent shelter of the Institution de Jeunes Aveugles anything could occur to destroy Louis Braille's happiness. Yet, a sorrow befell him more cruel than blindness had ever been.

His devoted friend, M. Pignier, was dismissed from the institution in 1840 and the new director, M. Dufau, was hostile to Louis Braille's system. He honestly believed that the use of an alphabet engineered by the blind would segregate them more completely than

they already were, and he knew that seeing teachers feared the loss of their positions if it was rendered possible for those without sight to teach the pupils by means of the Braille procedure. After Louis came back from one of his enforced vacations in 1843, he found that Dufau had changed the dimensions of the Valentin Haüy embossed letters and burned all the institution's old books. Unwittingly, he had prepared his own Waterloo, but for the time being it looked as if Louis had been defeated. Considering the mental travail he had undergone, it is a wonder that he did not succumb. But he was not a fighter by temperament, and, Christlike, he suffered in silence. Serenely, he continued his classes and waited for the day of his vindication.

**T**HERE was an intelligent man, John Gaudet, acting as assistant director at the institution, who at first sided with Dufau in the dot-alphabet controversy. But he was observant and soon realized the immense advantages of Louis' procedure of writing and reading. He published a fifteen-page pamphlet entitled "Account of the System of Raised Dots for Use by the Blind," and in 1844 he read it aloud at the opening of the new buildings of the institution which had been moved from Victor Street to commodious quarters on the Boulevard des Invalides, where it still stands. In the pamphlet, Gaudet described the tactile systems of Barbier and Braille and paid tribute to Louis' talent. A demonstration was given of the facility and pleasure with which the embossed-dot type could be read by little blind children, and its success was so pronounced, so undeniable, that Dufau accepted it as the official mode of instruction.

Secure at last in the knowledge that his supreme service to the blind was accomplished, Louis resumed his task of im-

proving his Braille musical notation, but his failing body prevented him from perfecting it, and he reluctantly let others steer to port the ship he had so faithfully commanded. Nevertheless, his soul was at peace. As he lay in the infirmary a month before his death, he said to a friend, "Oh, unsearchable mystery of the human heart! I am convinced that my mission on earth is finished." Thus passed from earth one of the bravest, purest revelations of genuine angelhood.

**T**HE unwearied activity of his clear, scientific mind, his calmness and forbearance, his inventive abilities as a teacher, the wealth of his heart expended in uncounted secret gifts out of his scanty savings to the needy, both blind and seeing, are a priceless legacy.

Another legacy is the beams which have been spreading ever since Louis Braille's death from the searchlight he kindled. One of those rays fell upon me when I was a little girl, only just escaped from the dungeon of deaf-blindness. By one of the small ironies of life it was not the system Louis Braille had originally conceived but a mixed version called American Braille.

Later, on receiving some books from England, I was delighted with the well-arranged dots of the alphabet and other excellent qualities that made it a pleasure for me to read European Braille. Years later, I studied at Radcliffe College with the aid of European Braille books, not only in English, but also French, German and Greek. The world around me shone afresh with treasures of poetry and thought on philosophy, history and literature in other lands. Enraptured I sensed my membership of the human race anew and welcomed the

"congress of the great, the wise,  
The hearing ears, the seeing eyes"

that brought me inspiration out of every clime and age.

This was the attitude which my teacher Anne Sullivan adopted toward me. She never let me be infected with the idea that I was different from others. She treated me just like any seeing and hearing child, and that is why my life has been a full, satisfying one.

**N**OT for a moment do I forget that the first need of the blind who can be trained is a chance to work for their self-support and be sustained by the social dignity which competence brings. But were it not for the Braille method of reading and writing, the world of the blind would be quite drab—worse than for the seeing without ink-print books. The blind are subject to countless restraints and restrictions and work alone is not sufficient to make them forget the curtailments they endure. Few who see are able or willing to read aloud to them any length of time.

As for blind children, they simply cannot be properly taught without Braille. The process of imparting information to them would otherwise be slow, clumsy and helter-skelter. Louis Braille's method gave the education of the young blind a stability and an ease undreamed of before. Without Braille the young blind would be denied many precious avenues to high scholarship, scientific experiment and the career of music, and at one entrance wisdom would indeed be shut out.

Out of my personal experience I give deepest thanks for Louis Braille, who dropped upon the Sahara of blindness his gift of inexhaustible fertility and joy. The gratifying privilege was granted me to work under Winifred Holt, who started the New York Lighthouse for the sightless, and again under the American Foundation for the Blind to establish European Braille as a bond between various countries. That system has proved to be of universal application to any language, longhand or shorthand; to mathematics and to music.

**A**LREADY, several world conferences on work for the blind have helped to spread Braille, practically as its inventor left it, to India, Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Ceylon and other parts of Asia, and even to Africa. Some Governments make arrangements to have all apparatus distributed free to their blind. As soon as the readers of Braille become sufficiently numerous, large libraries of embossed books will be opened for them in Asia and Africa. It is high time for Louis Braille's genius to be recognized throughout the earth, and for the story to be told of the godlike courage and heart of gold with which he built a large, firm stairway for millions of sense-crippled human beings to climb from hopeless darkness to the Mind Eternal.

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